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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

IN

HUMANITY'S RELATION

WITH NATURE

A Consultation

Yaoundé, Cameroon 1978

Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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INTRODUCTION

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This pamphlet contains some of the results of a consultation on "Religious Dimensions in Humanity's Relationship to Nature" which met in Yaoundé, Cameroon, 15-23 September, 1978. The General Report and the Group Reports describe at one level some specific issues relating humanity to nature, but at a more general level they continue the whole debate relating Christian faith to traditional cultures. In the Recommendations certain ritual acts, social structures and healing practices in traditional cultures are commended to the churches for serious study, patient understanding and selective emulation.

The consultation was organized by the WCC's sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies (DFI) and brought together some 60 Protestants, Orthodox and Roman Catholics from 15 different countries in Africa and 12 other countries in Asia, Oceania, North and South America and Europe.

During the consultation various myths, symbols and social practices from many parts of the world were analysed to illustrate similarities and differences in traditional cultures. Participants felt that many of these cultures had important lessons for humanity in terms of teaching a greater respect for and responsible use of nature.

The consultation realized that Christians sometimes live through unnecessary anxiety about their cultural loyalties and asked:

1. How can we celebrate our worship in culturally authentic forms? Here it was also suggested that a revision of some traditional Christian rituals may be made, enriching them with the spiritual experience of the younger churches.
2. How can Christian morality and theology speak to traditional family structures and sense of communion with ancestors?
3. How can Christians have recourse to traditional healers?

The consultation urged further dialogue with traditional cultures especially at regional and local levels.

The participants expressed the hope that their findings and recommendations would contribute to other ecumenical programmes such as the dialogues on the theme of humanity's relation to nature with Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus, the 1979 conference on Faith, Science and the Future, and the programme emphasis in the WCC on a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society.

John B. Taylor
Dialogue with People of Living
Faith and Ideologies
World Council of Churches

The following papers were made available or presented at the Yaoundé consultation and may be requested from WCC, Geneva, or Mouvement des Intellectuels Chrétiens Africains (B.P. 1539, Yaoundé, Cameroon).

I. Background papers

1. Memorandum from WCC Consultation on The Wholeness of Human Life: Christian Involvement in Mankind's Inner Dialogue with Primal World-Views, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1973 (English and French available)
2. Memorandum from Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, Accra, Ghana, 1977
3. General Report from Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians Colloquium on African Religions and Christianity, Kinshasa, Zaïre, 1978
4. Group Report on Christian Concern in Traditional Religions and Cultures from WCC Consultation on Dialogue in Community, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 1977

II. Papers presented

1. J.B. Taylor: Welcome speech (English and French available)

First theme: The Origin and the Organization of the World (Myths of Cosmogony)

2. N.K. Dzobo: The Theory of Origin and Destiny of Man as found among the Ewe of West Africa (French summary available)
3. E. Tuza: A Melanesian Cosmological Process (French summary available)
4. H.W. Turner: Prolegomena to a Christian Examination of Primal Religions in relation to the Natural Environment (French summary available)
5. Kimpianga Mahaniah: Les Mythes de Création en Afrique (English summary available)
6. K.O. Opoku: Time in the African Perspective (French summary available)
7. J. Agossou: Appropriation et Maîtrise du Temps par le Négro-africain (English summary available)

Second theme: The Human Person in Relation with Nature (Anthropological reflections)

8. E. Mveng: Essai d'Anthropologie Négro-africaine: La Personne Humaine (French and English available)
9. H. Aguessy: L'Expérience Religieuse Africaine en tant qu'Expression des Manifestations quotidiennes des Africains confrontés à la Nature et à la Société (English summary available)
10. P. Abega: La Vision du Monde du Bati Traditionnel (English summary available)
11. C. Wright: Causality and Liberation (French summary available)

12. T. Ahrens: Healing and Wholeness for the Human Person in a Melanesian Society (French summary available)
13. Makang: L'Expérience religieuse dans la Relation de l'Homme avec la Nature (English summary available)
14. K. Appiah-Kubi: Healing and Wholeness for the Human Person in an African Society - the Akan of Ghana (French summary available)
15. A.B.T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki: Medicine and Wholeness among the Bantu (French summary available)
16. B. Kitembo: Procreation and Responsible Parenthood (French summary available)
17. D.N. Lantum: Healing and Wholeness (French summary available)
18. Bongeye Senza Masa: Expériences religieuses dans la Culture africaine (English summary available)
19. H. Hebga: Role de la Sorcellerie (English summary available)

Third theme: The Church and Local Culture (Pastoral Orientations)

20. C. Wright: Education among People within and emerging from primal world-views (French summary available)
21. J.N. Kudadjie: Reflections on the Need to Harmonize the Healing Experience of Africa: a Pastoral Concern (French summary available)
22. E. Rutiba: Faith in Traditional Healing in Bufumbira, Uganda (French summary available)
23. R. Rakotondraibe: L'Eglise et la Culture Traditionnelle (English summary available)

GENERAL REPORT

Consultation, Yaoundé, 1978

INTRODUCTION

Under the auspices of the World Council of Churches a Consultation on the Religious Experience in Humanity's Relation with Nature was held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, from 15th to 22nd September 1978. Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic delegates from six continents met in study groups, commissions and in plenary sessions to discuss the various aspects of the general theme:

- Human Community
- Living in Community with Nature
- the Linguistic and Philosophical Aspects of the Body, the Soul, the Spirit and the Person
- Rites and Symbols
- Healing and Wholeness
- Life and Death

An overall picture of our discussions during the Consultation is provided in this General Report. Here we can give just an impression: the discussions in the commissions were as lively as those in the plenary sessions, evidence of the great importance the delegates attached to the problems being treated. No one could help but be impressed by the fraternal understanding with which men and women from such different backgrounds were able to work together in complete harmony, while fully respecting each other's diversity. It was encouraging to find that the study of particular cultural values does not necessarily lead to any hardening of our particularities, but can by the grace of Christ help us forward along the path towards true Christian universality and unity.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS

On Saturday, 16th September, several papers were presented and discussed the next day in informal groups. The notion of time in the non-western civilizations seems to have attracted the attention of most of the delegates. One group observed that the notion of time governs a whole philosophy of life; time appears as a parameter of African anthropology. Others stressed the way in which time is perceived by Africans, Melanesians, American Indians etc. It is seen as cyclical, sinusoidal, or spiroidal in the different cultural regions. In general non-western civilizations do not regard time as linear or have any notion of an eschatology. Yet, in spite of its circularity, time does advance, does progress.

Other problems raised on Saturday morning were only touched on in plenary discussion: the doctrine of human origins held by the Ewe whose religion dismisses the notion of sin and salvation; the conception of heaven and of the hereafter held by the Melanesians, which pictures these realms in terms of earthly realities, etc.

Six main themes were studied systematically in the commissions by English-speaking, French-speaking and bilingual groups. Reports based on these discussions were written and distributed to the delegates. We want here simply to touch on some of the major ideas which emerged.

1. Group 1: Human Community

The main thing is to emphasize the human value of traditional cultures, particularly in one of their finest creations, the community. Community is like a womb in which the individual develops and takes shape.

In a marvellous network of parental as well as cosmic relationships the human being has rights but also obligations towards nature and other persons and the spirits. The equilibrium of the individual in relation to these various partners finds expression in health whereas the rupture of this equilibrium takes the form of sickness. In addition to the community of the family the human being is also a member of larger communities - ethnic, national and in some cases the Church - to which he or she is committed and which are meant to contribute to his or her total fulfilment.

2. Group 2: Living in Community with Nature

Group 2 spent its time trying to discover the conditions for a harmonious equilibrium between humanity and nature, of which humanity is an integral part. According to the Bible humankind was charged by God with the stewardship of nature, but in the role of companion rather than as irresponsible overlord. Besides, it is in a person's own interest to respect, care for and develop the natural world on which his or her own life depends; in fact it is in nature that humanity finds food, clothing, medicines etc. In traditional society several institutions protected nature: ritual prohibitions, fallow land, collective property and community ownership of land; respect for supernatural forces, fear of certain events which seem to traditional people to be full of significance.

However, humanity also knows that in order to survive it is necessary to fight the hostile forces which menace human life: wild animals, natural catastrophes, etc. There are also the plagues resulting from the thoughtless exploitation of nature: pollution, the progressive exhaustion of resources, the ugliness of slums etc.

To religious people, nature reveals God's glory and can therefore rise to the knowledge and praise of its Creator.

3. Group 3: Linguistic and Philosophical Aspects of the Body, the Soul, the Spirit and the Person

The members of this group analysed (among the Ewe (Togo) and the Beti (Cameroon) as well as among the Melanesians (Oceania)) the basic constituents of the human person. The intention was not to generalize their observations by applying them as such to all non-European people but rather to provide an example of objective and thorough analysis which could serve as a model for similar research on other peoples, African, Asiatic, etc.

What strikes one among the Beti and the Ewe is that unlike the case of European dualism (body-soul) we are faced with several constituents of the person; in effect, while the Ewe admit two principles in humanity, that is, the female principle Se and the male principle Ku, Se includes a somatic aspect and a principle of individual identity. So too among the Beti, humanity is dual body, both heart and social ego. The Melanesians, on the other hand, see it as the vital flow inserted into a limited space. The group stressed the need for the Christian Church to discover and to take into consideration the various concepts of humanity among the peoples they seek to evangelize. This can only be done where there is a profound mutual and respectful dialogue.

4. Group 4: Rites and Symbols

The purpose of this group was mainly to show the need to find a ritual and symbolic expression in the non-western cultural heritage in order to increase people's openness to the Gospel's message. The group was fully aware of the fear so frequently expressed by some of the delegates regarding the paganization of Christianity or rather of the Gospel and sought to show that apart from such essential basic symbols as the Cross, which have been established by God, no ritual, liturgical or theological expression of a cultural kind can be universally intelligible. We still have an obligation to find a truly African way of transmitting the Gospel, one which is rooted in the very communities that we are evangelizing. The group acknowledged that this obligation is not a very easy one to fulfil, particularly in urban areas where so many ethnic groups are jumbled together. Nevertheless, it is possible to find a way to solve this problem.

5. Group 5: Healing and Wholeness

The group reflected on traditional medicine and its practices. Such practices are of different kinds and it is not easy to separate them from one another - herbalists, spiritualists and visionaries, etc. The source of this healing power which is to be found in Nature ultimately lies in the Creator himself. On the other hand, there is also the power to harm people, to make them catch diseases and to make them die; such powers are related to sorcery and black magic.

As to the relationships between traditional and western medicines, the group hoped that dialogue and collaboration could take place between them, since both types of medicine have much in common: a certain ritual approach, the use of plants, etc. The group's view was that therapy should take the wholeness of the human person into account and not just one of its two aspects.

6. Group 6: Life and Death

This group focussed on black African thought about life and death. The life-death dichotomy is of the utmost importance in our communities. African mythology tells of the origin of these two fascinating and fearsome phenomena. Traditional religions strive to strengthen life and to ward off death, as is exemplified in the rite of initiation or in various food, sexual or prophylactic taboos. Procreation and initiation, ensuring the survival of the individual and of the community, are the supreme means of promoting life. This is the black African

conception of life. But through the biblical revelation we are taught that God is the Creator of life, whereas death is a punishment for our sins.

Although the African values life highly, death, too, is not devoid of value altogether, since the African courts it, hoping thereby to meet his ancestors hereafter, provided his earthly tasks have been faithfully fulfilled.

The group also expressed the view that the Church should allow its followers to seek the help of healers but with prudence and discernment.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion to be drawn from the work of the Consultation is that nature can be a very interesting source of religious experience. It is in fact a reflection of the glory of God. But a number of delegates properly reminded the participants that the same nature may be stained by man's sins. It may become a snare, an obstacle, an idol. It should therefore be submitted to the liberating power of the Lord. Thus Christianity's attitude to nature should be balanced and serene and removed as far as possible from both naive romanticizing and anxious pessimism. Nature always belongs to humanity, humanity belongs to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

HUMAN COMMUNITY

Human values of traditional cultures

- A. Kinship
- B. Initiation
- C. Marriage
- D. Sickness

A. Kinship

Kinship is the basis of social unity in the traditional cultures. The vocabulary of social relationships in these cultures is based on kinship terms.

Morality: Morality is not only individual but social and cosmic. A person is responsible to a wider community and to the community of nature. Morality is concrete - it involves the whole person, body and spirit. There is a balance between person, nature and God (spirits). Sickness is the disturbing of this relationship of balance. Thus sickness belongs to the sphere of morality.

Obligation: It is the notion of obligation that holds kinship relationships together. This obligation extends to nature and to the dead as well. The equilibrium between the dead and the living has to be maintained. Healing is not only physical but also spiritual. There is reconciliation between the individual and the community and vice versa.

Kinship: Today in the traditional cultures a transition is taking place from a kinship community to a political community of the modern state. The problem is how to preserve this kinship unit within the present political structure. If this kinship unit is abandoned the basis of these cultures will be lost. What relationships are there between the ethnic kinship groups and the Christian community? Christian attitudes and teaching, while transcending the ethnic kinship group, have in some cases also narrowed and limited the outlook and attitude of the ethnic groups. Too often Christianity is also a threat to the equilibrium of society and nature.

The human being is always in relationship to the community, to nature and to the cosmos.

The importance of ethnic groups is shown by the fact that Jesus Christ belonged to the Jewish ethnic group and is an example of incarnation for every culture. In order to love others one must first belong to a group - a basis from which one relates to others. Parish work and ministry should be based on these small local ethnic groups.

B. Initiation

Initiation into a traditional cultural community was an entrance into full life - an introduction of men and women into the way of life of the community. It is an education in the global dimension of life.

- training of young people to overcome difficulties in life through specific things;
- relationship between humanity and nature;
- in medicine and healing;
- in the world of ancestors;
- the role of male and female, procreation;
- the role of family and community;
- study of the cultural traditions of the community (traditional art, dance, carvings, songs, building of houses, etc.);
- economic activity of community (tilling soil, harvesting, hunting, fishing, etc.);
- how to serve the community, training to defend the community, to be strong, to survive by themselves;
- a religious education.

Is it valid to repeat initiation in modern society? Whereas the traditional community was whole and global, modern society is fragmented and compartmentalized e.g. church, state, commerce and industry and the present education systems do not succeed in producing a synthesis; is it possible to integrate the values of initiation into modern education systems and give it a new formulation? Some modern societies have succeeded in preserving the integration of life, e.g. Japan, the Ibo of Nigeria. It is noted that these communities are the most advanced in their milieu. They have managed in some sense to preserve an equilibrium.

The success of the initiation depends on the family system and on the ethnic community framework. For too much of Western Christianity the religious and social life is not integrated. If this life-integration is to take place Christianity must be based on community.

C. Marriage

Marriage is part of the general idea of obligation toward one's kinspeople. Marriage and procreation are one and it is for the purpose of continuing the life of the community. It is the duty of the community to ensure the continuance of the life of the community so that each member of the community is encouraged to marry and the community ensures that marriages are successful. In this context marriage is a community affair. The tendency of the young people in urban areas of today is to individualize marriage - to make it an affair between the couple alone.

Problem: How to respect the choice of the couple and at the same time allow the community to be involved in the marriage? The value of the community's involvement in the marriage is that it becomes a support of marriage in times of crisis. Christian community must respond to fulfil this need of marriage, especially in urban areas.

Birth control: The need for family planning is felt differently in Africa today. There are traditional methods of family planning which are sometimes in tension with technical solutions imported from Europe, America and Asia. Population control must be seen in the context of the real needs of Africans and it must be solved by Africans.

D. Sickness

Sickness is the upsetting of the harmony of relationships between man, community, nature and spirits. Sickness involves the whole person, his bodily and spiritual aspects in his relation to community, nature and spirits. In treating sickness it is important to take all these aspects into account. The traditional healer recognizes these needs and his treatment is geared towards healing these needs. A traditional healer like Mallam Adam in Yaoundé is often in a better position to help and heal people because his home is at the level of people; he involves himself with his patients, has contacts with them and understands their problems.

The traditional healer attributes his power of healing to God and the spirits. He believes that God works in him to help and heal people.

What attitude has Christianity towards healing? Helping and healing people is doing good to people, so it is Christian. But not everything used in traditional healing is good. One must catalogue the different types of healing which can be accepted as Christian. This calls for flexibility. Modern medicine must be combined with traditional healing and medicine. African trained western doctors should collaborate with traditional healing and medicine. African trained doctors should collaborate with traditional healers to care for the health of all the community. Pastors should enter into dialogue with healers.

Problem of hospitalisation: Sick people are often put off by the modern big hospitals where they are isolated and feel like strangers. They are cut off from the support of their relatives and home environment.

COMMUNITY WITH NATUREIntroduction

So intimately is our life bound up with nature that in describing one we are necessarily describing the other. Nature is the source of much of our community experience and, through its abundance, it sustains our community life, giving us a concrete corporateness and collective identity. Yet we have not always used our dependence on nature rightly even though it remains the irreplaceable basis of life. On the one hand we fall under obligation to nature's munificence, and on the other we stand helpless before its hostile forces. But in either case we are inescapably tied to nature, and so great is our sense of dependence that we have come to refer to it as Mother Nature, the fountain of life and the source of goodness.

In practice the tensions and conflicts in the community are resolved by reference to nature, or through the collective will of the elders interpreted by means of nature. But modern changes have profoundly affected such a stable relationship between community and nature, as in the tension between village taboos and town values or between customary sanctions and the youth culture of urban centres. Such pressures are gathering force all over Africa, as elsewhere in Asia, undermining the traditional balance and harmony between humanity and nature.

Urbanisation is extending man's control of the environment and creating new communities. The relative insecurity of life in villages is encouraging population movements to town centres. The absence of traditional constraints on personal conduct in new townships has added to the usual deprivations of slum dwelling. Those who came to the cities in search of advancement find themselves drifting in a maze of despair and frustration. Their existence underlines the urgent need to extend the benefits of modernisation in such a way as to preserve some of the stabilising values of community and nature.

Humanity's problematic relationship with nature

We are acutely conscious of humanity's corruption of nature, exploiting it without endeavouring to rejuvenate it. But we are also reminded of the fact that God's glory is manifested in creation which bears the imprint of the Creator's purpose. In many ways Africans are deeply conscious of this important fact. For example, our concept of taboo as a ritual prohibition is designed to protect nature; its violation calls for restitution to be made to nature. Humanity is at the centre of the cosmos, not in a self-appointed or self-assertive role, but in a dependent, caretaker role, for his life depends on cosmic harmony being maintained. Nature is therefore not just an object but a tangible reality from which humanity derives its sense of wholeness and wellbeing.

Traditional farmers in Africa discern this sense of organic dependence on nature in terms of seasonable changes and the entire cycle of crop cultivation, all of which is now distorted or in danger of distortion by humanity's excessive interference which, paradoxically,

also forces upon humanity a desire to escape into nature as a remedy. Many are now dissatisfied with the kind of life which humanity's total domination of nature has produced, for the depletion of non-recoverable and non-renewable natural sources has challenged the myth of unlimited growth and productivity.

At the same time we are becoming increasingly aware of the fragility of nature in spite of its capacity for self-compensation. Unwise utilisation of nature, so characteristic of a consumer age, has forced upon us the need to understand our relationship to nature in terms of stewardship and not domination, for the true dominus is God, not humanity. Humanity needs to use nature to sustain life and improve the quality of living. However, we are now appreciating that such a goal may be difficult, if not impossible, to attain, with an indiscriminate use of natural resources. The quality of life we seek to improve from nature cannot be conceived outside the limits of nature. That is why some of us feel that to regain a harmony of community and nature we have to think in terms of a fresh eschatology: a renewal of the past and the coming of a new age.

In investigating more closely the African understanding of community and nature, the following picture began to emerge. Traditionally the African attitude to nature has been expressed in a concrete relationship to the land. Land-ownership is shared, corporate ownership. Families cultivate the land and possess it for that purpose as guardians who hold it in custody for the community. This community comprises the dead, the living and posterity. Such an understanding carefully defines the restricted role of the living, for if anything it is no more than a third of the collective interest. Private property does not exist in traditional Africa. An individual enters into possession of land when he is recognized by the community to have reached the age of maturity, ready to take on the responsibility of raising a family. By assigning a piece of land to an individual the community in one step initiates someone into full personhood and affirms its continuity with the past and future. By preserving the land the community is also preserving its own soul.

Tensions which have developed have been about the continuing validity of values derived from such an understanding of nature in an age when land has decreased in abundance, though the increased value still put on it shows how enduring are those values. Limited access has denied numerous people of a recognized source of personal identity. The fact that traditional people have understood nature as containing signs and natural events as bearers of tidings should mean that with decreased dependence on land the community has suffered a grave loss. Its immediate contact with the spirit forces has receded behind the concrete walls of inner cities.

Nevertheless traditional people did understand that nature has a fierce side and that they can be at loggerheads, in conflict, with nature. Natural catastrophes emphasize nature as a tormentor and destroyer of life. Their method of explaining this phenomenon and transcending it is to fall back on nature as Mother Earth who, however incomprehensible her ways, contains vast possibilities for man's life. If we characterize this attitude as faith we mean by it the willingness to trust in the ultimate efficacy of nature and to entrust ourselves to

it in seeking to replenish it as we go on using it. Nature is thus our ally, making up for our lacks and soliciting our cooperation in various ways.

Town life: Attractions and distractions

Nature as it existed in traditional community life has undergone radical changes in the towns and cities of Africa and in Asia. An increasing number of people earn their livelihood from salaried jobs, not from tilling the land, and in places where such people are concentrated, as in towns and cities, overcrowding makes land scarce and expensive. The persistence of village habits of possessing and cultivating small parcels of land in slum areas further reduces the usefulness of land as a source of livelihood. Fewer and fewer people are able to enclose plots of land for personal use, and trespass laws make empty spaces unavailable for temporary use. Many were attracted to the towns by the prospects of gainful employment and of escaping the constraining sanctions of close community living. At first escape into town life can be an exhilarating experience as the individual discards the inhibitions of custom. However, the disillusionment which quickly follows this is well-known, as is made clear at the end of this report.

Healing, Community and Nature

In many of our communities traditional healing is still an integral part of experience. In this consultation we have encountered such traditional healing in a tangible and graphic way by visits to local centres. The traditional healers see nature as a source of healing and a fountain of goodness. As healers themselves they act as intermediaries between the community and nature. Nature is charged with healing properties which humanity, by skilfully cooperating with nature, may extract and use. Healing itself is an ongoing process within nature: health and life are healing processes.

The herbalist uses plants and herbs in curative and therapeutic work of all kind, as well as in preventive and community work. Very prominent in the list of cases treated are mental or psychological disorders, many of which have their basis in community relationships. Many medicinal plants thus have a symbolic value in defending individuals against fears or phobias incurred as a result of social pressures. Others serve a restorative purpose in situations of identity crisis and the problems related to uprooted existence.

The emphasis in traditional healing on cooperating with nature while at the same time using it to heal and sustain life has brought sharply into focus humanity's responsibility towards nature. Modern science has flourished on the use of nature as data for investigation and unravelling the hidden mystery of things. Modern science believes that scientific explanations are not only possible but necessary for natural events and matter. But the natural order, which the scientist accepts as self-given and self-consistent, includes processes which are not immediately available to the senses.

Furthermore, we recognize that the task of explaining nature, of systematically breaking it down to its component parts and extrapolating hidden laws, is not complete without due regard to the moral and human consequences that flow from it. We recognize, too, that

extending the frontiers of scientific discovery and technological mastery carries with it a comparable responsibility for the effects on human and biological life. For example, the issue of violence in the human community, including the survival of the species, cannot be separated from scientific advances in space exploration and chemical/biological warfare. Thus, the limitations of modern science in the face of violence and the threat to life need to be assessed in terms of our fallenness as human beings.

The Prodigal Son and our human status

The ambiguities of modern science merely duplicate our experience of community life and nature. We are born into community life yet are restless from its constraints. We know its sanctions but want to know the freedom of town life. Once in the town we ache with a feeling of estrangement and long for reconciliation. And yet the way back is blocked with all sorts of difficulties, not least our unwillingness to admit our failures and to admit our need of others.

In our use of natural resources which modern science has made accessible we have been guilty of squandering and misusing our heritage. We have turned dependence on nature into inflexible domination, submission into subjugation. In the attempt to uncover nature's secrets we have missed what lies closer at hand, for not far from all of us lies nature with all of its healing properties. Like the Prodigal Son, modern humanity may be on the way to recovery.

GROUP 3

LINGUISTIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE BODY, THE SOUL, THE SPIRIT AND THE PERSON

1. The group emphasized the complexity of humanity in the African conception. It is not only body and soul which constitute a human being as in Christian tradition.

2. Several traditional conceptions of humanity have been advanced. Three of them are:

a) For the Ewe

1. Two principles constitute humanity: the female or creative principle named Se and the male principle, or principle of death, known as Ku. These two principles however are not separated, and they have their origin in a high androgynous divinity known as Mawu-Lisa.
2. The essential nature of humanity - Se - is based on creativity, and its veritable destiny is to promote personality and a creative society through its existential effort.
3. The Se has at least three further principal characteristics, but its constitutive unity is to be underlined. The somatic principle of its identity is called Szoto, that of its individual identity Selido, and Se is the central principle of life as shared by all humanity. It unites and animates all other aspects of life. Humanity is thus a complex entity constituted by essential principles which are inextricably tied one to the other in their duality.

b) Among the Beti

The body, nyol, constitutes palpable man. The heart, nnem, is the seat of the feelings and the conscience. The lower abdomen, abum a si, is the source of the most profound thoughts. The Beti believe that the human being can undouble itself, the spiritual part separating itself from the physical body, and move around alone accomplishing all kinds of acts.

It seems that Africans distinguish in the human being between the physical body, the double, the heart and the social ego. Of all these aspects it is the heart which is essential. The Beti say, "mit ane ve a nnem", a human being is, above all, heart.

The belief in an after life is held everywhere and is a very old belief. But the nature of the elements which live on is difficult to determine.

- c) Among the Melanesians the human being is the vital flow linked with the maternal parents. He is a person through the name received from the paternal clan. It is by the relationship to

ancestors and to taboos which protect the vital flow that there is harmony in the group. The totality is placed in a determined place which is the cultural support of the group. Existence takes place in a circular time linked to the rhythm of nature.

3. The group feels that for Africans each human being is androgynous and God himself is constituted by a male principle and a female principle. All beings are considered as constituted by a double principle, male and female.

4. What pervades us and is a mystery is life itself. The interventions of healers and the establishment of taboos which bring the ancestors into play are always there to protect life and to assure the harmony of the community.

rites and symbolsIntroduction

Rites and symbols, in a privileged way, enter into humanity's religious experience in its relationship to nature. Our group tried less to define concepts than to discern the realities which are found in the terms, rites and symbols in traditional cultures, particularly African ones. It was the group as a whole which decided on this limitation to a geographical area, for all the members were African with the exception of one member from South America. Due to this we are conscious of the fact that our selection has a very limited scope.

Report

These are the salient points which emerged from our discussions:

1. Rites: By rites we mean gestures, words or actions in the course of religious worship, an act of magic or the performance of a sorcerer, and intended to produce an effect which is attributed to an occult power. Thus not all rites are magic; they can be properly speaking religious, that is, an element of a worship ceremony that is addressed to our ancestors or to God. Rites have a functional role, that is, they must do something, produce an effect; thus the sacred bath, the ablutions, are a rite of purification intended to wash someone clean and take away moral impurity.

The effectiveness of a rite: All rites are considered effective, and this efficacy poses a problem, for it is seen as automatic, ineluctable, so the magical character becomes an essential element of all rites; the distinction between natural religion (limiting our remarks to this for the moment) and magic is no longer acknowledged. To this it may be asserted that it is simply a subjective conviction of the individual or the community that the effect of a rite is automatic, which qualifies it as magic. The magician, we know, pretends through incantations to force the will of the forces of the universe and of God himself. But if the operator is convinced that his action is human, however clever it is, he still remains subject to the acknowledged sovereign free will of God; his ceremony is not a magic one but a religious one. It must be said, however, that we have a tendency to slide unconsciously from a religious outlook into a magical one; our certainty about the efficacy of sacraments or prayer is not always free from ambiguity. While, for example, we may look for the grace of baptism, not from the material aspects of the baptismal rite but from the divine promise, we nevertheless often enclose God in his promise as if it were up to us to define the framework in which it has to be accomplished "hic et nunc". In addition we are sometimes secretly irritated with God when our prayers do not seem to be answered.

Traditional rites and Christian rites: materially these two kinds of rite can hardly be distinguished. Thus it is that we find in the ancestral religions and in Christianity ablutions, purifications, confessions of sins, laying on of hands etc. They are, however, very

different one from the other both in their origin and in their effect, since the former are a human institution thought to confer only purely natural blessings, while the latter are established by God himself and confer supernatural gifts. Nevertheless, we must realize that our Christian rites seem just as peculiar to non-Christians as theirs seem disconcerting to us; the best attitude to them is not one of scorn nor condemnation but of tolerance and even friendliness.

2. Symbols: As a working basis the following definition could be adopted: "Symbols are the materials with which a convention of language is constituted, a social pact, a pact of mutual recognition between liberties". Two aspects must be distinguished. The principle of symbolism, mutual liaison among distinctive elements whose combination is of significance, and the effect of symbolism, mutual liaison among subjects who find themselves strongly committed one to the other by a pact, an alliance, a convention, a law of faithfulness. In all these systems of symbols there exists a combination of conventional signs which constitute a message, which cannot be deciphered except by the initiated. In other words, the symbol is not understandable except within a given group.

Significance: the symbolic can be applied at different levels of reality: dance, hunting, fishing, religion etc. Some feel that the meaning of any symbol is to indicate human destiny. In their view the symbols express the project of a society through signs; they operate between two poles, life and death; each symbol allowing the allies of life and death to be discerned in nature, among spirits as well as among natural beings: plants, stones etc. These interesting remarks have not been discussed and reflected on in depth because of lack of time.

The effectiveness of the symbol which is language: commenting on the declaration of the healer at Njol-Bissen who holds that the word of powerful man confers on plants the power of healing, we have come to the conclusion that we must underline the known effectiveness of the word in all cultures, even the words of man to which we attribute something of the efficacy attributed by Genesis to the creating word of God. When a traditional chief is elected and enthroned, words and consecration gestures make of him a new being; he is no longer the person he had been minutes before when he was talking with his friends as equal among equals. One member of our group suggested considering sacramental efficacy in this light. The sacrament does not produce a miracle but confers a new meaning on a person or on a thing; this is what certain Dutch theologians call trans-signification. One must note, however, that it is not the materiality of the word which modifies persons or things, but rather the meaning that is attributed to them.

Attitude to traditional rites and symbols

Is it necessary to replace the western cultural rites and symbols transmitted with Christianity by rites and symbols derived from our own cultural heritages as the first churches did? If the answer is yes, why and on what conditions? If the answer is no, why not? It was not possible to give a clear answer to these pastoral questions. By way of response, some even raised further problems: urbanization in Third World countries has stimulated such a mixture of ethnic groups that it

becomes difficult, if not impossible, to suggest to the Christian community rites and symbols which would be meaningful to all. Someone then suggested doing without rites and symbols altogether. This was rejected unanimously on the ground that humanity cannot do without these essential elements of communication and that even if it were possible the result would be the disappearance of community. One makeshift solution would be to establish ethnic parishes wherever this was possible, or again to discover the new values, the new rites or symbols which have significance for urban dwellers renewing contact with the ancestral values. Through these it would be easier for us to pass on the Gospel message.

HEALING AND WHOLENESS

This group included Mr Phillip Deere, who as a traditional healer of the Muskokee Indians played an outstanding role as a first hand informant. Here are some ideas he presented to us by way of introduction at the beginning of our session.

Mr Deere observed as a practitioner among native in North America that humanity cannot be separated from nature. He himself had to study nature, which he had learned from the elders of his tribe. But there was, according to him, somewhere in history a time when humanity began to feel superior to nature; and now we have arrived at a point where man's impact on nature is so disastrous that man not only destroys nature but also himself.

All of us agree with Mr Deere that for many years traditional peoples in America, in Africa and in other parts of the world have been overlooked, and therefore their traditional ways of healing have been disregarded as well. There are still many disagreements between traditional healers and academically trained doctors and professors.

We then tried to distinguish between different types of healer, such as herbalists, medicine men, spiritualists, and men or women who have visions or dreams. In practice they probably cannot be really separated from one another. The first work mainly with plants and ingredients prepared from them. They are picked in the bush or are grown in gardens as we saw in Mallam Adam's compound. Medicine men, in addition to herbs and knowledge learned from their elders, possess something which could be regarded as inborn or acquired sometimes in early childhood. Spiritualists derive their powers of healing from spirits; we might call also them ghamans. As an example of a person who gains her healing ability from dreams and visions we mention Mrs Victorine Nana whom we visited on Tuesday.

Then the question arose: what is the source of all these healing powers? Our American friend believes it is nature; but nature cannot be separated from the creator who is within nature and not somewhere above it. Concerning witchcraft or black magic, which is used for evil purposes, it is also part of nature; like everything in nature, it has its positive and negative side. So far Mr Deere. The African friends stressed mainly the point that all these healers acting for good purposes have got a commission from that "other power", whether it be given a name or not.

A somewhat similar question concerned the origin of the power in the medicines themselves. Where are those powers derived from? In this connection it was interesting to learn that a great number of medicinal herbs have to be picked at a particular time, because at certain times they, or part of them, are in a specific state of chemical or physical activity, due to biological changes in the process of growing. A different view might be that there are spiritual influences working at specific times. Mr Deere stands in for the first opinion. In

addition the African members of the group underline that nature cannot be regarded as a material thing, but that there is an inherent vital power in it.

There was also discussion on the relationship between traditional medicine and western medicine. It was said that traditional medicine sometimes works more slowly unlike modern medicine which can have an immediate although sometimes superficial or temporary effect; on the other hand, traditional cures are sometimes faster and more effective, for example, with some psychiatric patients. For both types certain prescriptions exist as to how to take them, for example, after a meal etc. So there is some sort of ritual element in both cases.

When talking about the causes of illness, all of us were convinced that illness is very often in a person's mind rather than in the body, so that the mind has to be cured first. This holds especially for what we call the "psychosomatic" diseases - to employ a western term. Mr Deere stressed that before the healing process can work in a person his or her mind has to be sober.

There are many methods of healing. One can use herbs, rituals, prayers, massage etc. In all these methods harmony with society and nature is essential. The restoration of the patient's harmony with his or environment is often lacking in western medical practices. It may be that the society also needs changing, and not simply the person fitted into an unchanged society. The restoration of harmony is especially important when a person has made a mistake in society and therefore feels guilty. For the reconciliation of such a person with nature and society, communication between the healer and the patient is of great importance. Only if the two believe in each other is the healing process possible.

LIFE AND DEATH

Black African thought derives its foundations from life and death. Between these two realities there is a relationship both of opposition and of complementarity. Life fights against death but "without death life would no longer be life" (myth). In other words, the struggle of life against death is in reality the source from which all the elements of the world derive their *raison d'être*. Life and death are therefore to be regarded as the two powers, even the two basic principles, on which the cosmos rests.

Thus religious experience emerges basically as primarily a duel: life confronts death; and secondarily, as a human endeavour to enlist nature as an ally in the struggle of life against death.

But once the conflict between life and death, a conflict which we hope will end in the victory of life over death, has been discovered, certain questions arise: Where does life come from? Where does death come from? What is the value of life? What is the value of death? In the light of this connection between life and death, how are the other world and the end of the world to be envisaged?

ORIGIN OF LIFE AND DEATH

The problem of the origin of life and death is tackled in a variety of ways. Myths, traditional religions, and the biblical revelation all speak of it.

1. Myths

According to the myths which describe the origin of life and death, God used to live with humanity in the beginning and the latter did not die. It was the era of life. Then something happened - the mythical event. This marks the end of continuous life and the beginning of ephemeral life, i.e. of death. In other words, humanity offended God. God withdrew and death established itself in the world. Life, therefore, comes from God. And according to certain myths death derives from humanity's fault; according to others, from the absence of God.

2. Traditional religions

Traditional religions make initiation the source of life. At the conclusion of initiation the initiated person is strong, i.e. alive. When that strength fails, the person dies, even if continuing to live. We can say, therefore, that the strength of the initiated person is life and that the extinction of this strength is death. We need to specify, therefore, that in black African thought there are two lives and two deaths: natural life and death, and cultural life and death.

This is why black African religions, which seem on the surface to be anthropocentric but are really theocentric, set themselves the goal of strengthening the human potentiality for life.

Moreover, death and life have a communal source. The black African lives in the community and this community is sustained by taboos. When a taboo is infringed by a person that person leaves the community, in other words, dies. In this sense death means separation from the community.

3. Biblical revelation

According to the book of Genesis, God, the Creator of all things, is the author of life. Death derives from sin which is in fact the separation of humanity from its Creator.

VALUE OF LIFE AND DEATH

Unlike death, life is supremely important to Africans. This attitude finds expression in the respect which they accord to certain structures.

The family, for example, is extremely important for the African. It is through the family that a person's name is perpetuated as well as that of ancestors and of the community in history. Offspring therefore acquire an essential value for life, since for black Africans procreation is the goal of life. Not to have children, therefore, is a terrible misfortune.

The importance of the family is reflected in various forms of social behaviour: polygamy, levirate law, for example, all of which are effective weapons in the service of life and the struggle against death in the form of sterility.

Respect for life and the rejection of death are also reflected among black Africans in their fear of blood. To shed blood is the worst crime one can commit: The black African holds the wicked person, the sorcerer, in short everything which is able to shed blood and destroy life, in horror. This is also why black Africans attach such importance to expiatory rites.

In short, the black African regards life as a supreme value and rejects death as being the negation of life.

REINFORCEMENT OF LIFE

A number of weapons are available which a person can use to protect and reinforce his potentiality of life. They include:

- family solidarity: in time of war, famine or sickness, the family by common consent girds itself to fight against the scourge in question;
- the need to recognize the double human dimension: in Africa, humanity is bound up with nature; among the Yoruba, in Bénin, every human being is twofold, with both a physical dimension and a parapsychical dimension. This parapsychical dimension may take the form of an animal, a plant or a star. To overcome or to attend to a person's physical dimension, therefore, knowledge of his parapsychical counterpart is essential.

Finally, black African society has its strong human beings, able to fight against death: the traditional priest, the healer, the diviner etc.

THE OTHER WORLD

According to traditional religions the initiated person enters into contact with the other world though without actually entering it.

Among the Malagasy, the beyond is symbolized by the tomb. This is why they like to build large and beautiful tombs and to live in huts. For this world is ephemeral whereas the other world is eternal.

Moreover, the same lot does not await everyone in the other world. Those who lived good lives go to live with their ancestors; those who have lived bad lives become ants or bees etc.

THE END OF THE WORLD

According to the Christian tradition, this world will come to an end and a new earth will take its place. In traditional religions the idea of the end of the world is absent. The world is eternal. This eternity is assured by the procreation and perpetuation of the species.

PASTORAL CONCLUSION

The main pastoral question is this: Should the Christian priest, pastor or religious leader, allow Christians to go to the healer for treatment? The answer is yes. Christians may go to the healer for treatment because the healer, unlike the sorcerer, is serving life. But Christians should exercise great discernment, so as to be able to distinguish especially between the satanic healer, the psychotherapeutic and herbalist healer and the charlatan.

societies in America, Africa, the rest of the Third World, and also in the developed countries, and for the establishment of a new economic world order, in particular within the framework of the North-South dialogue and economic relations between the Third World and the developed nations, as well as within the developing countries themselves.

III. In view of the linguistic and philosophical aspects of our relationship with nature and in particular:

- a) the enormous variety and diversity of traditions in the Bible, in Africa, and in the rest of the world;
- b) the many points at which these traditions converge and the constant elements which they disclose, e.g. (i) the complexity of humanity and its relations with the community and with nature, (ii) the bipolarity of life (opposition between life and death, the male-female duality, complementarity of man and woman, the androgynous symbol of God), and (iii) the decisive role devolving upon woman as the bearer of life;

We recommend the churches:

1. To make every effort to introduce and develop a theological and pastoral training based on a deeper knowledge of the religious traditions of our peoples, their conceptions of humanity, their linguistic categories, and in particular, the conceptions of humanity which underlie the behaviour of traditional peoples.
2. To allow for the complex realities expressed through these traditions and to exercise the greatest possible care in defining moral laws for human beings and their relationships with nature.
3. To undertake studies of the bipolar character of life, in the light of the revelation in Christ, and to enhance the role of woman as the bearer of life not only in society at large but also in the life and ministry of the Church.

IV. In view of the rites and symbols of our own cultures and in particular, in view of:

- a) the fact that many of these rites and symbols constitute a language in which the religious experience of human societies is expressed, and
- b) the fact that in accordance with our traditions, the role and function of these rites and symbols must nevertheless be understood in the context of this religious experience;

We recommend the churches:

1. To attach greater importance in their teaching and preaching to the symbolic, ritual and sacramental structures of the Christian religion. This will entail a more thorough study of rite and symbol in the course of theological training.

2. To do all they can to ensure that Christian rites match the daily needs of Christians in their specific society and environment, by interpreting certain traditional rites and symbols in a Christian sense.
3. With this object in view, to revise the traditional rituals of the churches, enriching them in the process with the spiritual experiences of the younger churches.
4. To encourage the communities of religious orders to embody in their community life the values of traditional spirituality and to interpret them in terms of their Christian religious vocation.

V. In view of our experiences of and reflections on healing and wholeness in our traditional societies, and in particular, in view of:

- a) the variety of types of healer;
- b) their healing methods;
- c) their efficacy and resources;
- d) their explicit relationship with the Creator;
- e) the causes of sickness in our traditions;
- f) the importance of nature in the phenomenon of sickness and in the healing process;

We recommend the churches:

1. To encourage dialogue between healers and modern doctors so as to ensure improved health for both individuals and communities, taking into account the financial and practical implications of such action.
2. To study objectively and take seriously the beliefs and practices of sorcerers, magicians, exorcists, etc. which people take as explanations of their sickness.
3. To carry out the mission assigned to us by our Lord, to preach, teach and to heal the sick; to do all their power to fulfil this ministry of healing, by service of the sick in hospitals, in their homes and in the streets, by compassionate welfare work, and also by studying traditional healing methods and the possibility of encouraging some members of our Christian communities to offer themselves as healers in the service of the sick; and to develop the ministry of help to the sick by hospital chaplaincies, the charismatic healing ministry, prayers and rites for the sick. This concerns all ministers.
4. To explore and rediscover the theological and pastoral significance of the sacramental anointing of the sick, still practised in the Orthodox churches especially.
5. To give their full support to all efforts to promote health and wholeness by the provision of adequate nutrition, sanitation, housing, confidence in life and its meaning, etc.

VI. In view of attitudes to life and death in our traditional societies, and in particular:

- a) the special place which the mystery of life and death occupies in the mythology of traditional religions as well as in the Bible;
- b) the fact that in our traditions life is so inseparably related to death that it can be said that life is born from death and death from life;
- c) the fact that life, considered in its supra-temporal plenitude, is the greatest human value and the supreme existential reality, whereas the tension between life and death expresses the human experience in its totality;
- d) the fact that this life must ultimately triumph over death and that the hereafter is a concrete reality in the life of our peoples;
- e) the fact that the creation is a reality which will never end, just as is the life in which the species are perpetuated;

We recommend the churches:

1. To make every effort to identify, respect, renew and assimilate the positive values of traditional societies and, in particular, their reverence for life, their reverence for the dead, the continuity between this life and the hereafter, the belief that this earthly life conditions the future life and that there is justice after death, etc.
2. To include in Christian research and study the mystery of life and the mystery of death which underlie the practices of sorcery and witchcraft, so that Christians may more effectively liberate individuals and communities in the grip of such practices.
3. To help Christians to be the champions of reverence for life in their societies at every level of life and equipped to live their faith even in alien ideological contexts and to work for the spiritual and temporal salvation of humanity so that all may have life and have it abundantly.
4. To develop pastoral ministries and liturgical forms in relation to death which will be appropriate to our traditions and interpret and give account of the promises of life and resurrection and of the hope that is in us.

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